

The Agenda of “Policy Agendas in Australia”

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Introduction: The Policy Agendas Project

At any given time in a society certain issues will be in the public eye or discussed in the media or being promoted by pressure groups and in the literature these are called the policy agenda (Kingdon, 1984, 3). Some of the issues make it on to the government agenda and legislation will be enacted. One of the big issues in political science and the policy sciences is how and why do some issues make it onto the policy agenda of the government but others fall by the wayside (Schattschneider, 1960; Bachrach and Baratz, 1962; Cobb and Elder, 1972; Downs, 1972; McCombs and Shaw, 1972; Kingdon, 1984). After all government faces an abundance of information about the state of the world and issues have to compete for attention in a restricted space. The Policy Agendas Project (PAP) builds on this earlier body of work by collecting and organising data from public sources to map changes in the national governmental policy agenda. PAP began in the United States, with the coding of most aspects of Presidential and Congressional agenda and policy-making since 1900 using a standardised codebook (see <http://www.policyagendas.org/>). In subsequent years the methods used in PAP have been extended in many different countries and the Comparative Agendas Project (see <http://www.comparativeagendas.org>) now includes fourteen jurisdictions within its ambit (John 2006). The ARC funded study we are engaged upon extend the PAP to Australia. In this paper we describe the methods of PAP and how we are adapting them to Australia as well as critiquing the existing PAP literature.

This project will use quantitative and qualitative research methods to address policy agendas and policy change in Australia. It closely follows the methods and will be part of the major Comparative Agendas international collaboration first set in train by Professors Jones and Baumgartner (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Baumgartner *et al.* 2006; John 2006) which has had a massive impact on the study of public policy worldwide. By extending it to Australia we will first systematically describe the policy agenda in Australia, deepening the

descriptive comparison recently produced by Tiffen and Gittins (2009), but also theoretically develop PAP and add new elements using Australian data.

The PAP collects longitudinal data on policy agenda from various sources to examine policy change. Baumgartner and Jones' original study (1993) used a standardised code book which constructed the policy agenda in terms of 19 major policy codes and more than 250 policy sub-categories. The advantage of the policy agendas method is that the use of a standardised code book makes possible extensive historical and comparative research (See Baumgartner *et al.*, 1998, for a discussion of the origins of these categories and coding procedures and John, 2006, 10-11 for a discussion of the assumptions of the PAP). The major policy codes are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: The 19 Major Policy Codes

1. Macroeconomics
2. Civil Rights, Minority Issues and Civil Liberties
3. Health
4. Agriculture
5. Labour, Employment and Immigration
6. Education and Culture
7. Environment
8. Energy
10. Transportation
12. Law, Crime, and Family Issues
13. Social Welfare
14. Community Development, Planning and Housing Issues
15. Banking, Finance, and Domestic Commerce
16. Defence
17. Space, Science, Technology and Communications
18. Foreign Trade
19. International Affairs and Foreign Aid
20. Government Operations
21. Public Lands, Water Management, Colonial and Territorial Issues

The general theoretical idea behind PAP is that governments face continual demands to address issues and they must *choose* which issues to prioritise. The PAP assumes that governments devote more attention to those issues they wish to prioritise. By coding all

legislation, for example, we can indicate the relative importance government gives to policy topics.

The assumption that the level of attention paid to an issue is indicative of the priority attached to it is not uncontroversial. At times a significant policy issue may only be the subject of a few well-chosen words and a key policy announcement. On other occasions governments may deliberately downplay some issues in order to minimise political conflict. Alternatively, they may devote a great deal of attention to other more marginal issues if they are low cost and popular. For this reason, proponents of the policy agendas method recognise the need to supplement quantitative measures with interviews and detailed case-studies (Baumgartner and Jones 2009; Pralle 2003; Resodihardjo 2009; Walgrave and Varone 2008). For that reason the project uses both quantitative and qualitative data.

Application to Australia

We know a lot already about the policy process in Australia (see Fenna 2004, or Maddison and Deniss 2009 for reviews) and there are many detailed studies of how public policy is generated which provide valuable insights into the Australian policy process. What our study adds is a broader overview and the possibility of systematic comparative analysis across many other countries for which similar information has been collected. The broader overview will enable us to see differences in the generation of policy across issue areas. It has long been recognized that policy forms within subsystems, policy networks and communities and features of these subsystems differ leading to different types of policy outcomes. Many of these have been mapped through case studies. We will enhance those case studies by adding a layer that systematically examines which policy areas have had incremental change; which (for periods) have had radical change; which areas have seemingly been led by government initiative; and which by the media, public opinion or even, perhaps, the opposition. In some

models of the policy process problems and solutions need to be analyzed separately as new policies often emerge during ‘windows of opportunity’ and not necessarily simultaneously with problems (Kingdon 2003). Jones and Baumgartner (2005) argue that the policy process can be seen as ‘punctuated equilibrium’: policy development has periods of incremental change followed by periods of radical change. Some subsystems might change only incrementally over long periods of time; others have the equilibrium policies punctuated with radical change more often. We will examine to what extent this is the case in Australia thus coming to a better understanding of what is unique about Australian public policy-making, and what it shares with policy agenda in other countries.

As well as describing and comparing attention to policy, we are interested in measuring the influence of the public on the policy-making process and in finding out whether a change in public opinion leads to a shift in the policy agenda. While public opinion is often studied in isolation this study will closely examine the dynamic interactions between public opinion and policy-making and capture these interactions in our statistical analysis. Governments are sometimes criticized for just following public opinion but we do not have a sophisticated empirical understanding of the extent to which this occurs and how this has changed across time and by different leaders and governments. We will consider the positive and negative feedback mechanisms that are inherent in government responsiveness and report on the attention of government to multiple issues. As well as coding legislation, we will be coding budgetary changes, prime minister’s questions, and media coverage, to try to establish the extent to which the government, opposition or media sets the agenda for policy discussion and legislation and examine what role public opinion plays in all of this.

As part of the international Comparative Agendas Project we will follow their methods of coding all legislation over a long period of time; code questions in parliament (to see if the Opposition can affect the policy agenda); code media reports (to see if and when the

media follows or leads government); code budgetary data to see if we can track policy importance through fiscal means; and code public opinion. The quantitative analysis will be deepened through qualitative case study analysis in two separate streams. First, we will invite experts in different policy areas to write a case study history of their topic following a set plan of questions, and having access to the descriptive data we have assembled. Second, following the quantitative analysis of how policy agendas are formed in different issue-areas – which demonstrate which have had policy stability, which crisis management, and which are subject to punctuated equilibrium – we will compare and contrast these processes descriptively. The first set of case studies will be chosen in advance to secure a wide theoretical coverage; the second will emerge following the quantitative analysis.

There are thus two separate foci concerned with policy agendas within this project. One is the overall focus of the government. What policy areas are taking up most of the government's attention in any given period? Any given government can only deal with a certain amount of legislation at any given time, but we can examine – over the course of each government, prime minister, party (or coalition) or over the whole time period – the patterns of legislative intent. We can therefore examine the attention to different policy areas at different times and how that attention has varied over time. The second focus is how policy *changes* within a given policy area; whether that change is incremental or radical, whether it is led by government, by public opinion, the media or results from a sudden external shock or crisis. The quantitative analysis will examine the overall patterns of agenda change in first focus – the pattern of change over time. The qualitative analysis is concerned with the second focus – the specific policy changes within issue areas. (The qualitative analysis will be supported by the quantitative coding – by how we have coded specific items of legislation within a given issue area; how we have coded the media attention within that areas at different times; the type of questions asked at Question Time and public opinion on that

issue. However, the specific attention to the detail of policy change within any issue areas can only be captured by detailed historical analysis. In this regard our quantitative analysis provides a both a general backdrop and also a resource for the qualitative program.

This study is thus theoretically informed, and will use both quantitative and qualitative empirical methods to examine the policy process.

Approach and Methodology

As we have suggested we will adopt both quantitative and qualitative approaches to analysing the policy agenda and policy change in Australia. For the quantitative analysis, we will carry out comparable work that will be done in the projects in the Comparative Agendas Project (as outlined above). We will follow Jones and Baumgartner (2005) by counting bands of legislative interest by plotting the distributions around the median point, and applying statistical tests to see whether the distributions are leptokurtotic or normal as predicted by the incrementalist model. The second main line of analysis is to undertake time-series analysis of legislative agendas (and, if possible, budgets) as predicted by public opinion, media attention, and social and economic variables. We will perform regression analysis seeking to predict the content of legislation, using annual media counts, aggregate data (such as the economy) and public opinion as predictors, and then predict the content of prime minister's questions with monthly data from the media. We will analyse budgets in the same manner.

One aspect of the Australian Agendas Project is the relationship between the states and the federal government. Some initiatives on policy might emerge from State governments. The latter case is rare we think, though some evidence exists, for example in housing policy, that the Commonwealth has followed local initiatives (Parkin 1988). Such aspects will not be picked up in our quantitative analysis. Evidence of such policy learning from the states to the federal government can only be picked up in our study through

qualitative case study analysis. We strongly believe that both quantitative and qualitative methods are justified and, contrary to much debate, are highly complementary. Quantitative methods are best for approaching some research questions, qualitative methods for others. In that sense they are not rivals. This research will utilize both quantitative and qualitative data which are then used to address different aspects of our query. Our qualitative analysis will take place in terms of two separate sets of case studies with different theoretical bases. The first will be conducted by the research team; the second will be commissioned from experts in particular issue areas

Qualitative Case Studies

Case studies emerging from the data

From the quantitative element of this project the investigators will collect case-study materials on selected key events in the time series, in particular the occurrence of punctuation in policy. Coding of legislative data will allow us to examine spikes in specific policy areas, and we will be able to see via the PMQ and media coding how far the legislation was set by the government how far by other actors. Based on these spikes in specific policy areas we will be able to delve deeper into how policy change occurs through the form of a desk collection of historical records through a media search and the use of relevant expert publications. Process tracking of specific policy changes through history will enable us to deepen the analysis through which the agenda is shaped. We expect to conduct three such case studies. They will examine the precise course of dramatic policy change in specific areas. The case studies will emerge from the quantitative analysis and will not be chosen in advance.

Case studies commissioned from policy experts

We will hold a conference at which selected experts will be asked to provide historical accounts of policy change in their area of expertise and to write them up for a major edited book. One of our primary concerns in the case studies is the relationship between central and state governments with regard to policy formation and implementation. We will set a firm design for each case study. Each expert will be asked to pursue an outline of the history of policy changes in their issue area examining major shifts in policy; the influence of the media and public opinion; and the controversy involved; and to track implementation. They will be supported by data collected by the main Australian Agendas Project team.

Our initial thoughts on the commissioned case studies are in the fields of education, health, housing, environment, rural and regional affairs, indigenous affairs, immigration and economic policy. This will ensure broad coverage of many of the main policy areas that have been studied comparatively. We will also include an issue that whilst not unique to Australia might have a different shape to other issues (indigenous affairs). (We have set aside social welfare as a complex issue which cuts across several other policy areas). These case studies are not set in stone at this stage however, and others might be commissioned as feasible. We will use the case studies to track the process to see whether policy changes tend to be incremental or punctuated and, if the latter, whether the punctuations are clearly caused by external shocks or have more endogenous causes (party ideology).

We are by no means uncritical of the existing PAP literature. In the section below we outline some of our thoughts on the PAP literature as well as problems that we may be able to overcome with our Australian agendas project.

Theory

There are numerous theoretical strands in the PAP/CAP literature and not all writers place the same emphasis on different aspects. Indeed Baumgartner and Jones own views over the nature of changing policy agendas seem to have developed over time. We will try to place emphasis upon those aspects of the theoretical underpinnings that we believe are most original and useful and downplay those that we consider to be less important.

The major idea behind PAP is that the complexity of issues and the frailties of human decision-making together with the complexity of interactions within government mean that the policy agenda, whilst stable or developing only incrementally most of the time, changes rapidly at unpredictable intervals. The shape of the policy agenda – relative stability followed by punctuations of rapid change – they call punctuated equilibrium. As an empirical description punctuated equilibrium has been demonstrated by PAP/CAP. Punctuated equilibrium is at times described as a metaphor (Jones and Baumgartner 2005, p. 5), though is also seen as a theory of agenda change (True 2002). We will suggest in a moment that it is best to view punctuated equilibrium as an empirical description, one of the dependent variables to be explained and not as a theory of policy or agenda change. Rather we think theoretical emphasis should be placed upon the multi-dimensionality of issue-space; the framing of issues; the frailties of human decision-making and finally, and this is where we believe the true originality of Baumgartner and Jones arises, the interaction of political institutions and human decision-making that leads to negative and positive feedback loops into policy change. We are not convinced however, that the relationship of the two types of feedback loops are necessarily connected to punctuated equilibrium as empirically described in the manner some PAP proponents seem to suggest. We will discuss that issue below.

Another element of the PAP/CAP is ‘bounded rationality’. Baumgartner and Jones (1993; 2005) emphasise that humans are not utility maximisers nor do they use Bayesian

updating when taking in new evidence, rather they are boundedly rational. Whilst we agree that the frailty of human decision-making is important we do not feel that punctuated equilibrium requires bounded rationality as an assumption. Indeed Baumgartner and Jones only really discuss the costs of information gathering and calculations which are perfectly consistent with constrained maximization models (Arrow 1984), whilst Bayesian updating can easily lead to long periods of stability even as new information arises if decision-makers priors are high enough, and radical change occurs only as calculations of costs and benefits tip over at some point. What distinguishes bounded rationality from constrained optimization or utility maximizing is Simon's notion of aspiration levels (Selten 2002; Gigerenzer 2008) which seem to play no role in the extant PAP/CAP models. Nevertheless, decision costs, timing and framing remain key aspects of human frailty in decision-making. Bryan Jones (1999) suggests human behaviour cannot be modelled by constrained optimization but does not consider constrained optimization within frames of reference. He also mentions aspiration levels in his review of bounded rationality, but no particular use is made of it. However, we consider that PAP/CAP not necessarily relying on bounded rationality constitutes one of its strengths rather than a weakness of the approach.

Punctuated Equilibrium

Punctuated equilibrium is an empirical finding about the shape of the agenda change. In order to be a theory it would require a mechanism that explains its shape. We suggest that in fact there are several ways in which agenda change might include punctuations and the major original mechanism – positive feedback – will not necessarily be connected to the punctuations as empirically demonstrated in the literature. We thus dismiss punctuated equilibrium as a *theory* of policy change – Baumgartner and Jones specify mechanisms that would go under better names. We explain why the analogy to Eldredge and Gould's (1972)

punctuated equilibrium model of evolution is not a good one to punctuated equilibrium in policy change.

Gould and Eldredge (1972, see also Gould 1989; Vrba and Niles 2005) provide a rival model of speciation to that in 'standard' Darwinian accounts of evolution. In the standard model genes are naturally selected given their phenotypic vehicles success within the environment. Small changes in the gene's vehicles over long periods of time leads to the development of new species and the extinction of others. Gould and Eldredge argue that evolution is not as incremental as they take the standard Darwin argument to be. They argue that gaps in the fossil record do not merely mark missing records but that species evolve rapidly during certain phases and then do not evolve much. So speciation occurs in relatively fast bursts of activity followed by long periods where modest changes in phenotype wobble around a mean equilibrium. Speciation occurs following mass extinction due to colossal change in the environment. Relatively rapid change occurs as evolutionary niches are filled with new types of animals. Once the niches are filled and the environment stable new species do not arise and only minor changes occur within phenotypes. The latter claim the important one for their account of punctuated equilibrium. They do not claim there is no change from one generation to the next, but that subsequent changes do not accumulate, rather species shudder around its phenotypic mean. In that sense they do seem to have a different account of evolution from Dawkins (1996; 1999). Dawkins agrees that there can be periods of more rapid evolutionary change where for example there is mass extinction following rapid environmental change and species evolve quickly to fill niches. But he argues that evolution continues and changes are cumulative. If Gould is right, then evolutionary change is driven by the rapid change and once these have been completed evolution essentially stops and the minor changes we can document are equilibrations (or wobbles) around the phenotypic mean.

What is important in the evolutionary debate is not the empirical claim of relatively stable species followed by relative bursts of change (Sterelny 2007). Dawkins agrees that there can be periods of more rapid evolutionary change where for example there is mass extinction following rapid environmental change and species evolve quickly to fill niches. But he argues that evolution continues outside of those fast bursts of activity, and these changes are cumulative. If Gould is right, then evolutionary change is driven by the rapid change and once these have been completed evolution essentially stops and the minor changes we can document are equilibrations around the phenotypic mean.

Taking this analogy to the policy change case, incrementalism is the idea that policies only change slowly over time. Policies do change – for example there might be liberalization of drug laws, or an increase in the penal sentences, for violent crime – but these change slowly over time. Looked at in retrospect, today's policies seem very different from fifty years ago but have changed slowly over the period. That would be incrementalism. It might be that there were some major changes, say, thirty years and fifteen years ago, which changed policies more rapidly in the liberal direction. That would still fit the incrementalism idea of slow change, but with the recognition that at times the process has speeded up. (And we might be able to give reasons why that occurred at those particular times). That version of punctuated equilibrium is consistent with a general incrementalist argument. However, a Gould punctuated equilibrium applied to the policy sphere would be rather different. Here, the liberalization of drug laws over the fifty years would include the two major changes of liberalizing drugs policy, but all other changes would equilibrate around the policy mean – some would liberalize, some would not. That would constitute a 'punctuated equilibrium theory' of policy change. But that is not our reading of claims made within PAP. Rather Baumgartner and Jones make no claims about equilibrating around a mean with rapid change at times. Their measures only show periods where agendas have a great deal of activity, and

periods with less, but they do not consistently show equilibrating around a mean outside of those periods of more intense interest. Hence we think that what they do in the policy sphere is incremental changes with some rapid bursts of activity. This is better described as punctuated incrementalism. This is a better empirical description than incrementalism itself but is consistent with different types of reasons, mechanisms or theories of policy change.

Possible Reasons for Punctuations

There are a number of reasons why policy punctuations might occur, some due to human frailty in decision-making (we label 'micro-processes'); some due to the nature of the political process (we label 'macro-processes'). Baumgartner and Jones argue that often these occur because of the interaction of the micro- and macro-processes. Some of the underlying features of the micro- and macro-processes are identical, some are different.

Micro-Level

1 Re-evaluation

Many issues are complex. People can change their minds about the relative worth of different courses of action. Sometimes minor alterations in a policy will not address its difficulties hence a radical different policy might be developed. This might come about following a long period of environmental change leading the person to decide slowly that a new radical policy needs to be adopted; or it might follow some new information that means that the merit of the old policy is re-evaluated; or it might follow some crisis.

One way in which re-evaluation can occur is because new issues arise within a policy sphere, or they might arise even though the issues remain the same but new evidence emerges. Such evidence might arise due to a 'crisis' or simply emerge over time.

2 Framing

Issues are multi-dimensional and so can be reframed. Whereas the first involves some re-evaluation at a basic level – someone changes their mind about an issue – framing is rather different. It has been well attested experimentally that people can come to different decisions about the same problem depending on how the issue is framed (Tversky and Kahneman 1982; Kahneman and Tversky 2000). So for example if the issue is framed in terms of potential loss of life of a few people, then decision-makers tend to choose one course of action. If the issue is framed in terms of potential gains in life expectancy of a larger set of people then decision-makers choose another course of action. But the potential loss of life of a few is consequent upon the potential gains in life expectancy of many others. This involves no change of mind, since the decision-maker holds both (inconsistent) views simultaneously. If a particular decision is framed in one way at one point in time and then framed in another way a later point in time then a decision-maker can change the course of policy direction. Framing and reframing could lead to constant changes in policy even though no one has changed their preferences. Thus an individual decision-maker might shift resources dramatically within a given issue area not because of any real change in the nature of the issue but simply because of how the problems have been framed.

3 Attention Shift

Shifts can occur because of a change in attention without any reframing or changes in preferences (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Jones 1994). A politician or government might have a set of policy desires but they cannot all be carried out at once, so a sequence occurs. If we follow that sequence it might appear the preferences of the decision-maker are changing as she devotes attention and resources first to one issue and then another. In reality no preference-change has occurred but attention has shifted from one set of issues that have been

‘dealt with’ to another. The agenda as viewed by discussion in the media, legislation and parliamentary time might have shifted, but the ‘agenda in the mind of the decision-maker’ has remained constant as she ticks off those areas she wishes to deal with.

Macro-Processes

1 Shadowing Micro-Processes

All three of the above processes can also occur at the macro-level. Of course, given the frailty of human decision-making the three micro-processes might occur simply through the behaviour of some important agenda-setter such as a president or prime minister. However, at the macro-level these shifts can occur through alterations in the views of the public, or through the workings of specific institutional processes. For example a shift in attention could occur simply through the normal working of a government. For example within cabinet governments ministers often have to vie for space on the agenda with the most powerful often getting their legislative proposals onto the agenda first. Eventually however a particular issue area that has not had major legislation for some time will get on to the agenda. We might label this ‘Buggin’s turn’ which might be modelled as though it were random which might lead to something akin to punctuated equilibrium. More generally the PAP literature sees attention shift occurring due to the operation of organized interests. The literature refers to policy entrepreneurs who try to reframe complex issues in order to shift the agenda in a specific direction. Or how an issue which has been handled in one policy arena is shifted to leading to a new emphasis.

2 Crisis

Attention shift and reframing might occur due to some crisis that hits. Nuclear policy changed in the US following the Three Mile Island crisis, and is being re-evaluated around

the world following the Japanese tsunami which caused problems at Fukushima Daiichi plant.

The genesis of attention-shifting is an important aspect of how we judge policy change. Given the empirical finding of punctuated equilibrium, why is it that change occurs only incrementally for periods of time and then we have massive upheaval? There could a slow drip-drip of problem that then come to a head in a perceived crisis. Problems with housing policy or health care can be noted by the public and the media or in parliamentary systems by the opposition to such an extent that the issue eventually becomes an electoral one. At this stage government might begin to take radical action. Or an issue can suddenly become important because of some crisis. An accident at a civil nuclear power station can lead to action not only on safety and regulation within the nuclear industry but might also reverberate more generally through power generation. A report on safety issues within say, the building industry, might be taken up by others pointing out that statistics show mining, or manufacturing or agriculture have similarly poor safety records meaning state action is broadened. Crisis to some extent might be seen as an external 'objective' event. A nuclear meltdown is a nuclear meltdown, but crisis can be framed or socially constructed in the sense that issues that have been around for a long time become discussed in a new manner.

3 Competing Interests

It is in the interests of different groups to try to frame issues in specific ways. Given the ways in which compromise is often brokered between different groups it is to the strategic advantage of groups to exaggerate or increase the issue-distance between them when bringing items to the agenda. Ward (2004) shows that such strategic behaviour means that interest lobbies often present their positions as being more opposed than they really are (so their positions are more radical than if there were not opposing groups). PAP uses the Kingdon

(2003) argument that ‘policy entrepreneurs’ can wait for windows of opportunity to bring new ideas to the agenda. These processes can independently lead to punctuated equilibrium.

4 Institutional Effects

Another set of macro-processes are purely institutional ones. Competitive democracy itself might encourage policy punctuations as political parties or candidates search for new ideas to take to the voters in order to secure electoral victory. In the highly partisan politics in many democracies any policy put forward by one major party will automatically be opposed by the other (foreign relations especially defence or war issues being one major exception) and hence the opposition will develop its own policies. Once in power the opposition might take some time to get around to developing and legislating their new policies but new policies might form a radical departure from the past. Seen in this light one might wonder why there are not more radical departures than seen in the CAP evidence, but of course radical opposition policies are often watered down by the realities of governing and the policy heritage literature has demonstrated that much of what government actually does is implement the policies of its predecessors. We might expect to see a greater rate of punctuation in conflictual parliamentary (Westminster) systems than in more consensual coalition systems and more than in presidential systems. The greater the number of veto players that exist in a system seems to correlate with policy stability (Tsebelis 2002). The CAP literature has not examined this comparative aspect in enough detail yet to corroborate these ideas.

5 Policy Venues

One important institutional aspect of framing is the nature of policy venues. One way in which to reframe an issue is to present it to a different set of political actors within a different

policy community. Thus aspects of agricultural policy can be shifted from the agricultural policy community to food production and distribution more widely; or into environmental policy or the health policy community. Moving a particular aspect will reframe it in the sense that the new policy community will look at the issue with different eyes in terms of their concerns.

6 Media and Public Opinion

One aspect of changing policy agendas is how far those processes are led by policy elites, whether in interest groups or by elected politicians and how far through the force of public opinion and the media. To some extent public opinion has to be a key variable, when politicians do come up with new policy ideas they are looking for popular ones that can help secure electoral victory. The drip-drip of failure in issue areas especially major ones such as health care or education do affect vast numbers of people who will make demands on policy makers. Few people seriously doubt the importance of the mass media as an effective force on the policy agenda, even though scientifically pinning down its actual effects have proved exceedingly problematic. The press almost certainly both leads and follows. The mass media can bring attention to the public and politicians policy failure and few investigative journalists have almost certainly been key actors in many countries over the years. Of course, interest groups are well aware of the media and can encourage and lead journalists into changing public and government opinion or bringing issues to the fore. All of these influences interact strategically with one another. The press also follows public opinion and certainly follows the agenda set by governments and (perhaps less often) by opposition parties. The media bandwagon jumps onto issues and then when some other issue or crisis comes up leaves them behind. Together with all the other factors the role of the media within a democracy might well encourage policy punctuations.

Negative and Positive Feedback

The most important theoretical aspect of the PAP literature is the idea of negative and positive feedback which is part-and-parcel of the interactiveness of micro- and macro-processes of agenda change. Negative feedback occurs when there is shift of attention and some new issues get attended to through the legislative process. Empirically such agenda change should be picked up in the coding of legislation, media and possibly public opinion. The issue is raised, it is dealt with, and the government, media and politicians then turn their attention elsewhere. There has been a 'blip' in the policy agenda and then business continues as usual with other issues achieving attention. Such agenda change might occur as an issue that is rarely in the government or public mind comes to the fore and is dealt with, or because an issue that is constantly being addressed, such as taxation, education or defence policy, but greater attention is devoted for some time perhaps as a new radical policy emerges or a crisis looms. The important aspect of negative feedback is that once attention has been focussed and legislation passed, the focus moves elsewhere.

Positive feedback occurs when a shift in policy attention has led to new legislation which then continues to keep the issue on the agenda. Baumgartner and Jones argue that positive feedback occurs when the legislation has created new institutions which ensure that attention cannot be diverted. For example, environmental legislation might involve setting up a new regulatory agency which then leads to greater and regular oversight from the legislature. The agency itself will become an interest which might press government for more legislation or greater discretionary powers, or these powers might lead other interests to organize to reduce the power of the agency. Empirical examination of the development of interest groups demonstrates that they positively feed into growth as one side organizing encourages opponents to organise too as does the growth of executive agencies and the Congressional committees taking on oversight in new area (Walker 1983). The interaction of

agenda attention leading to new institutions then feeds into keeping attention deployed upon those new issues forms the positive feedback loop.

Punctuations do not mark increases or decreases in the amount of attention for a given issue as such. Rather punctuations are measured by an increase in the rate of change of attention within a given time period. A large increase in one year will mark a punctuation, a large increase in one year followed by a similar increase in the following will mark a punctuation only in the first year. Of course the specific time-periods become key elements in the measurement. An increase of n , spread over a 12 month period would mark a rate of increase double the size if the 12 month period was January to December, than if it was July to the following June. This is not necessarily a problem since the empirical use made of evidence of punctuations is only to show that the pattern of agenda attention is consistent with the theoretical claims of Baumgartner and Jones, and not for any other predictive purpose.

We might note here that the idea of ‘punctuations’ is somewhat different in the cases of negative and positive feedback loops. Punctuation in the first case implies a fairly constant amount of attention followed by bursts of greater attention before returning to the norm. The measures adopted described the change in the rate of attention, but the quantity of attention in the theory of negative feedback is that it returns to the norm. In the second case positive feedback punctuation implies a change in the quantity of attention followed by a continued increase in the quantity of attention. In this case punctuation is a continued change in the quantity of attention. In the first attention is altered and then returns to the norm. In the second attention has altered and continues in the altered state.

We have presented some differences between punctuated equilibrium in the agenda and in the biological case. The biological case is about speciation – the claim is that the rate of change in the number of species is speeded up following mass extinction. In the agenda

case there is no claim about changes in the rate of increase of issues. We could imagine such an analogy. Some issues simply were not on the agenda in the past – environment for example was barely as issue in the past; whilst sub-categories were entirely absent. To demonstrate such issue-speciation we would need to look at the increase in the number of sub-categories over time. Has that increased incrementally or, as we would expect, also gone through punctuations. What causes the increase in the number of sub-categories that receive attention as opposed to the amount of attention within any sub-category? Furthermore can we produce a taxonomy of types of issue that has shown any species change. That is, rather than seeing issues simply in terms of ‘topic’ in the manner we ordinarily do, are there specific functional changes in policy – such as shifts from distributional to regulatory policies.

Conclusion

In this paper we have outlined the approach our project will take as well as what we see as some of the shortcomings of the existing PAP literature. This follows on from previous and ongoing work on the governor-general (GG) speeches. We conducted a pilot study of this work examining policy agendas of the Australian government as revealed through the governor-general (GG) speeches as the start of each new government (Dowding et al. 2010). In that pilot study we discovered a secular increase in the attention accorded to macroeconomic, labour, employment and immigration issues and health, education and social welfare issue and a secular decrease in the attention accorded to agriculture, international affairs and defence. We discovered that the ‘turning-points’ in a number of these cases came with the election of the Whitlam government. We discovered that policy change seems to be characterised both by incremental changes in the attention accorded to issues *and* punctuations as attention suddenly increases and then falls away. We also found that the punctuations in the post-war executive agenda include civil rights in the 1970s, and the

environment in the late 1980s; and that a disproportionate number of these punctuations also followed the election of the Whitlam government. In a follow-up analysis that went beyond the agenda itself examining ideology we find that despite Whitlam permanently transforming the policy agenda he did not fundamentally shift the ideological spectrum (Dowding et al 2011). Indeed, as expected there was a right-wing reaction to his time in office. Ideologically, Whitlam represents a punctuation and not a turning-point. The pilot in terms of the GG speeches is of some value for our broader study. GG speeches characterize the intentions of government as they wish to be seen at the beginning of a term of office. Of course in office governments often get blown off course by events. Furthermore, it might be possible for the media or the opposition, or other social groups to grab the policy agenda in certain areas. These possibilities we hope to map with our quantitative descriptions and then try to explain through detailed process-tracking qualitative analysis. We recognize that policy can be led by State governments and whilst we might not be able to provide a thorough analysis of their effects in our overall descriptive analysis we expect to see their importance in some policy areas. In this project we hope to both analyse the policy agenda in Australia and to add to the theory of policy change.

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